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# Performing Musician

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Drums for Shakira

**Rudy Sarzo**

Bass for Ozzy

**Phil Palmer**

Guitar for everybody

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# Brendan Buckley

*Drum maestro*



## Joe Matera

**F**or Brendan Buckley, providing the diverse and essential beats that drive South American pop princess Shakira's recording and live work is both challenging and exciting, and a position he totally finds himself comfortably at home in. Having first fallen in love with the drums at age 14, Brendan quickly began practising along to Van Halen and Police records, but it wasn't long before his musical route detoured from the run-of-the-mill rock path to an immersion in the world of Latin musicality. Upon graduating from the University of Miami's School of Music, he thereafter found himself on the road with Latin rock act Fulano de Tal and Julio Iglesias, which eventually led to him hooking up with Shakira in 1998, with whom he remains today.

## The Shakira experience

**Performing Musician:** Your main and long-standing gig is with Shakira. Does the approach you employ with her differ from other artists?

**Brendan Buckley:** "When working with multiple artists, each one can require a different approach. I find it helpful to start by imagining what the artist might want to hear and feel from the drum world. For example, one artist

Aside from his long-standing gig drumming for Latin pop star Shakira, Brendan Buckley is also a first-call player for a wide range of artists, from Daniel Powter and Gloria Estefan to Irish folk rocker Damien Rice.

may want something very drum loop-oriented, while another artist may want their drums to be extremely interactive, dynamic and organic.

On the Shakira gig, I am asked to cover a very broad spectrum of styles within the course of one concert. Some of her songs are based around eighth-note rock beats where I get to put on my John Bonham hat, while others are full-on dance tunes where I play four-on-the-floor disco beats. There are even some songs that are so electronic that I find it better to play them on my DrumKAT and Akai sampler. I simply sample all the kicks, snares and explosions from the original Pro Tools sessions and lay them out across the DrumKAT. Then I perform the parts as if I were a drum machine, so we can avoid using too many sequencers on stage. Over time, I have found that certain songs sound better when played exactly like the record and other songs allow more room to experiment, adapt and rock out."

**PM:** Are there many musically demanding aspects to the Shakira gig?

**BB:** "I can think of two. The first is the variety of styles in which we, as a band, have to play. We do everything from Latin folkloric music to Arabic beats, to rock & roll, to super-pop, to piano ballads, to dance and electro stuff. The second aspect is the accuracy. It is a challenge to play two years' worth of concerts while attempting to nail each one of them perfectly. And by perfect, I mean playing the set from top to bottom while nailing the pocket and the click track and still keeping things exciting and fresh on stage."

## Performance preparation

**PM:** When it comes to pre-tour rehearsals, do they also vary in scope and time frame?

**BB:** "Each artist places a different emphasis on rehearsals. On one end of the spectrum, the Shakira organisation have been known to rehearse for up to three months before a big tour. There are so many details to cover. First, we put a band together and we rehearse both old and new material. A few of the songs from the



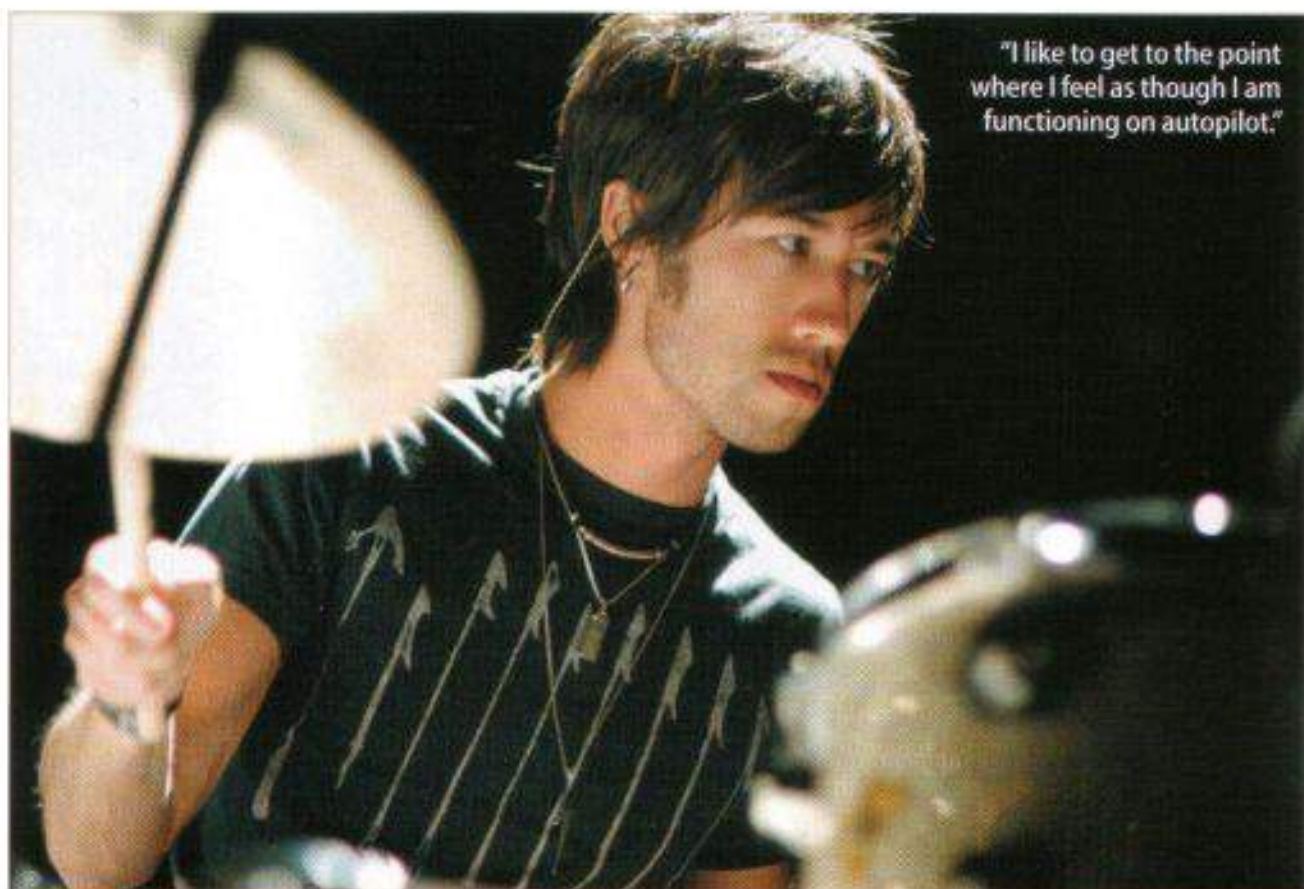
previous tours may need new arrangements to surprise the fans. After the band works up all of the music, Shakira comes in to begin singing with the band. Then the choreographers arrive to start working on the dance moves to go along with the new arrangements. Next, the monitor and front-of-house engineers and the video and lighting guys come in to work on the sound and visuals. It takes a while to put a show like that together. On the other hand, I have worked with artists who keep the rehearsing and production aspects to a bare minimum, just show up and play!"

**PM:** Does learning the set list material require a lot of sight-reading? Or is it primarily a learn-by-ear process?

**BB:** "Well, I come from a deep background in music reading. I started on piano and trumpet, and when I switched to drums I played in orchestras and jazz bands where I read miles of charts. I think reading is a very valuable skill. That being said, I hardly ever read music on gigs nowadays. I can't even remember the last time an artist or a producer handed me a chart or anything like that."

"Normally, when someone hires me to do a show or a session, he or she sends me CDs in the mail and highlights the songs to learn. More often, a person emails me the MP3 tracks from demos, album cuts or live versions. I'll listen to them and then write my own charts of the arrangements with notes dictating tempo markings, song lengths, dynamics, the spots where the drums enter and layout, any signature beats or drum fills that appear to be essential to the music, and so on."

"Next, I'll internalise the songs by losing the charts and playing the tunes by memory. I like to get to the point where I feel as though I am functioning on autopilot. During this whole



"I like to get to the point where I feel as though I am functioning on autopilot."

process, I am also morphing the songs to make them more my own."

## Sound issues

**PM:** What effective sound strategies do you employ when it comes to working with the differing acoustics of the venues you play?

**BB:** "Some rooms have extremely weird acoustics and ringing sounds. In those cases, I might deaden the drums a bit with some gaffer tape or Moon Gel. Sometimes I put a little more padding in the bass drum because the low end is getting out of control. Sometimes a different microphone or microphone placement could be the solution. There are times where the cymbals could be too bright or too dark. Maybe the stage is tiny and everybody is standing way too close to one another. I try to adapt my sound to the size of the stage, the size of the venue, and the

amount of people on stage and in the audience. There is no one thing that works all the time, and there is no perfect solution to every problem."

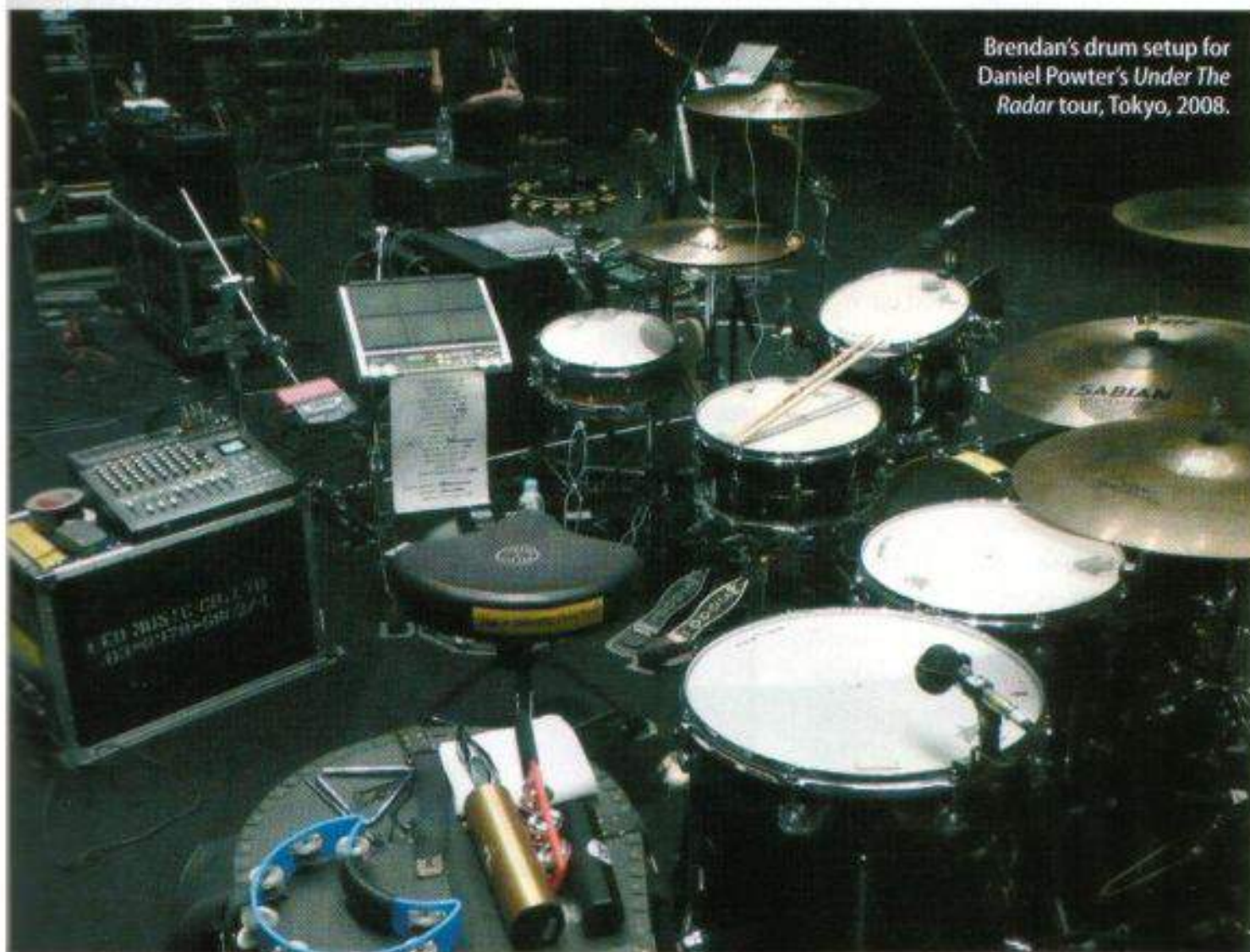
**PM:** When it comes to managing your on-stage sound, is there an approach you adhere to?

**BB:** "I prefer using a combination of in-ear monitors and wedges. Sometimes I find in-ears to sound a bit weak and lacking in the low-end department. They rarely feel powerful or rocking. You have to really crank the volume up, which gets to be detrimental to the health of your eardrums. Therefore, it's great to have an 18-inch sub behind me and/or a couple of wedges in which to put musical elements such as the bass guitar, the kick/snare/toms and so on. For elements that require more time accuracy, I'll put them through the in-ear monitors, such as loops, percussion parts, click tracks. That allows me to use the wedges and subs for vibe and energy. Having big wallops of air pushed at you is better than having little percussive nails shot into your ear canals! In the end, this helps me keep my overall stage volume lower, which in turn helps keep me from going deaf."

## Finding a rhythm

**PM:** Speaking of click tracks, do you play with them all the time?

**BB:** "I'd estimate that I use click tracks roughly 50 percent of the time in a live scenario. Of course, it varies from artist to artist. There are many different reasons to have a click track running for a song or an entire show. Sometimes there is a complex light show that runs off timecode, and the only way in which to sync the music and lights together is to use a click track. Sometimes the band use certain elements like sequenced strings, loops, arpeggiators or background vocals. In those cases, we'd need to lock with a click track" »



Brendan's drum setup for Daniel Powter's *Under The Radar* tour, Tokyo, 2008.





» too. Even when I play with an artist where click tracks are not necessary, I still find it helpful to use a metronome for count-offs. It keeps the transitions between songs seamless."

**PM:** Achieving a monitor mix that is perfectly suited to your needs is integral to your live sound, isn't it? Especially with all the timing and tempo factors involved.

**BB:** "Yes, a bad monitor mix can be distracting, and can make it very difficult to perform a show. I tend to prefer to have as little as possible in my in-ear monitors to lower the chances of a possible meltdown. Depending on the size of the band, I usually make a priority list of what I need in order to function.

"With the help of the monitor engineer, I put the people with the best time-feel the loudest in my mix. I prefer those people to be the bassist and percussionist. That way, we can get a nice, rhythmic, low-end machine going on the stage, and then we can let everyone else push and pull on top of that foundation. But sometimes the

rhythm guitarist may have the best time-feel, so I will go with that. And at other times the lead vocalist can have the best time-feel. He or she might have a unique phrasing style that is essential to the music, so I'll choose to lock in with that."

**PM:** Is there any hard-and-fast rule you adhere to in your course of action when it comes to soundchecks?

**BB:** "The drum set is like a giant monster of little parts, and there are so many things that can go wrong with this contraption. For the first 15 minutes of soundcheck, I usually spend quality time going around the drum set with my drum tech, tightening loose parts and making sure everything is screwed in correctly. Then I make sure the drums are tuned, because things like humidity and vibration can make the drums go way out of whack. I will also check for things like cymbal cracks from the night before. Next, we'll test the sound with the monitor engineer to get the stage going. After that, we'll check the front-of-house sound and make sure everything is cool in the room.

"There have been many times in which, after a two- or three-hour soundcheck, and the audience doors are about to open, the sound is still totally messed up. When that happens — and it will happen — you just have to wing it and do your best with what you have."

**PM:** Obviously, things do go wrong at times...

**BB:** "Where do I start? During the set a microphone may fall down, or a cymbal stand might vibrate off the riser. At an outdoor show a strong wind could blow your floor tom or ride cymbal over. Cymbals crack, drum heads

pop, drumsticks break, the coils on the bottom of the snare drum snap, batteries on in-ear monitor packs die, curtains don't go up, risers get stuck, musicians space out, sequencers shut down... All the electricity can go out on stage. That actually happened quite recently at an outdoor concert with Beto Cuevas. The entire stage went black, so we just kept the crowd clapping as the crew hurried to power up some backup generator.

"If you sit there and expect every show to run perfectly, you'll be sorely disappointed. I think the goal is to shoot for a perfect show, while at the same time accepting all the chaos that could happen. In retrospect, the craziest shows seem to be the funniest, most memorable ones."

## Listen and learn

**PM:** Having had a schooled background, how does having those educational skills compare to the actual experience of performing in the live environment?

**BB:** "The skills I learned at music school were very valuable to me. My high school and college music professors gave me tools, inspiration and encouragement when I needed them most.

"But simply going to school will not make someone a professional musician. It can get you going in the right direction. Beyond being



Shakira's gigs cover a wide range of musical styles.



A DMC Ground Control, which runs the sequencers, sits alongside a Tama Rhythm Watch metronome.

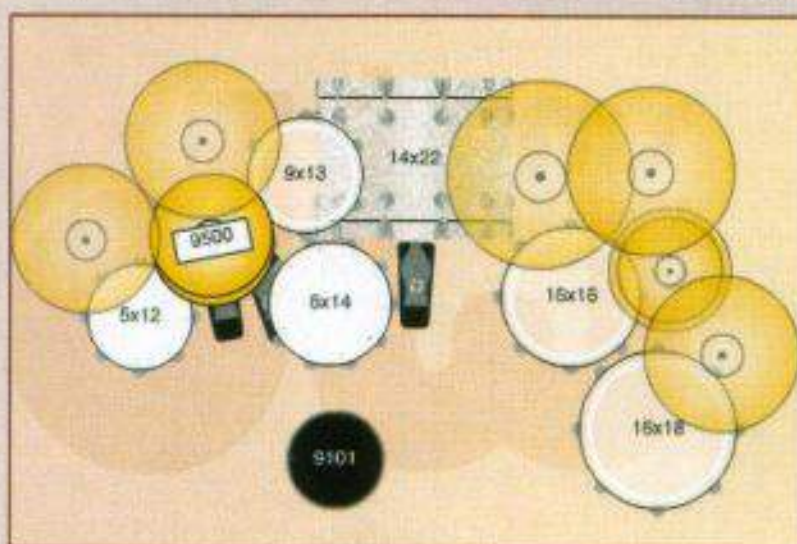


## Brendan Buckley's touring drum setup

Brendan utilises a different drum setup for touring and in the studio. Here's the stage rig in detail.

- **Drum Workshop Classics** (poplar/mahogany shells) 9 x 13-inch rack tom, 16 x 16-inch floor tom, 16 x 18-inch floor tom, 14 x 22-inch bass drum, 6 x 14-inch Classics snare drum, 5 x 12-inch Edge snare drum.
- **DW 9000 hardware.**
- **DW 5002 double bass drum pedal.**
- **Pure Sound snare strainers and bass drum beaters.**
- **Heads:** Remo Coated Ambassador on tops, Clear Ambassador on bottoms, Clear Powerstroke on bass drum.
- **Sabian** (from left to right) 17-inch AAX Studio crash, 15-inch Sizzle hi-hats, 18-inch El Sabor crash, 21-inch HH Raw Bell Dry ride, 19-inch Vault crash, hybrid X-hat (12-inch AA top, 14-inch AAX Chinese on bottom), 18-inch HHX Ozone crash, 40-inch Chinese gong.
- **13-inch bronze timbale.**
- **Cyclops tambourines.**
- **Cyclops mounted tambourine.**
- **Mambo cowbell.**
- **Various shakers and caxixis.**
- **Valje bongos.**

- Jingle rings.
- Jingle sticks.
- World Beat cajón.
- Dumbek.
- Remo Tar (frame drum).
- Remo Riq (Egyptian tambourine).
- RMV Pandiero.
- RMV 18-inch surdo.
- Rhythm Tech Ribbon Crashers and tambourines.
- Sticks: Vic Firth 5A wood tips, Heritage wire brushes, T1 General timpani mallets, Tala Wands.
- Future Sonics in-ear monitors.
- DrumKAT 3.5.
- Alternate Mode and Roland kick triggers.
- Ddrum SE4 drum set.
- Ddrum triggers.
- Akai S5000 samplers.
- Mackie 1604-VLZ mixer.
- Roland HPD-15 Handsonic.
- Roland SPD-S sampling pad.
- Tama Rhythm Watch metronome.
- Apple Mac Intel laptop 2.16GHz (with Logic Pro, Pro Tools 7.1, Digital Performer 5.1, Reason 3.5, Peak 4, Ableton Live 5.2, Garage Band, Aksys).
- M-Audio Oxygen 2 keyboard.



- Digidesign Mbox 2 workstation.
- IK Multimedia: Sonik Synth 2.1, Sample Tank 2.5, AmpliTube 2.
- OWC FireWire drives.
- Electrix Filter Queen vintage stereo filter.
- Line 6 DL4 delay pedal.
- Pro Co RAT pedal.
- MXR Dyna Comp pedal.
- Electro-Harmonix Deluxe Memory Man pedal.
- Boss Super Phaser pedal.
- Digitech JamMan pedal.
- Boss SP-202 and SP-404 phrase samplers.
- Korg microKORG keyboard.
- Casio SK-1 keyboard.
- Edirol R-09 recorder.

schooled, though, it is important to have the discipline to push yourself past the academics. You have to get out there in the world and play with working musicians.

"I think the best schooling one can have is the opportunity to go out every night of the week, and by either watching or playing gigs with different musicians, clumsily discover what it is that works and doesn't work in real-life settings. Patterns in textbooks don't always work on a stage. There are many people who have never gone to a music school, but have risen to become very successful musicians. And there are others who have spent countless precious hours and dollars in schools and have done nothing with their music degrees. I like to think of my experience in high school and at the University of Miami as my bachelor's degree, and all the experience gathered since then as my post-graduate degree!"

**PM:** What are the most important elements in achieving a great live drum sound?

**BB:** "Over the years, I have acquired a lot of knowledge regarding drum sounds by being open-minded, while experimenting and learning from others. You can't always be married to what you think works. It's helpful to be flexible and willing to adapt. Take a kit, preferably a good one, and learn how to tune the drums high, tune them deep, tune them wide open, or tune them dead. This skill can help you achieve the best sound from night to night."

"Another secret is to befriend the front-of-house engineer. Remember, it's not only about what sounds good while situated in the position of your drum throne; it's equally as important to consider what the engineer is projecting to the audience through the PA system. If the engineer is not getting what he or she needs from the drum set into the

microphones, through the mixing board and out to the people, then you're going to sound weak. You may think that you have the coolest drum sound in the world, but that sound might not all be transferring to the masses. It truly is teamwork. Both you and the engineer have to conspire together to invent the most wicked drum sound ever!"



▲ Drum setup for Shakira's *Tour Of The Monopose* in 2002-04.





## » Drum variety

**PM:** Does your live drum setup differ much from your studio setup?

**BB:** "My approach does differ, depending on the situation. For live playing, I prefer to set up one universal drum set that covers all the bases. I like for that drum setup to have all the necessary sounds to perform the songs, but to include nothing extraneous or distracting."

"Projection is important. I want these drums to make an impact, to hit the audience directly in the chest, whether they're standing right by the front of the stage or in the back row of the nosebleed section."

"The size of the venue makes a difference to me also. Will the show be in a soccer stadium, an old theatre, a rock club or a coffee shop? How many microphones will be on the kit? How is the PA system? Another thought to keep in mind is whether the gear will be flown from city to city or if the show is a 'one-off' using rental equipment. For a rental show, the musicians are at the mercy of the rental company's selection. The company might not have all the odd sizes and exotic world instruments in one's everyday setup."

"In the studio, I like having many palettes from which to choose. I surround myself with dead thuddy drums, bright open drums, dark smoky cymbals, loud cutting cymbals, crusty tones, modern sounds. I mix and match instruments until I find a combination that inspires me, the producer and the other

musicians in the room. Often, I bring percussion instruments to meld together with the drums. I enjoy mixing electronic sounds with acoustic ones. Keeping a DrumKAT or Logic Pro or a Roland Handsonic nearby helps with those moments. Experimenting with effects can sometimes spur an idea too. When possible, I will set up a few cheap microphones, run them through some guitar stomp boxes and play along to the freaky results."

"My procedure in the studio is to listen to the song first with no initial drum reference. Seated on the sofa, I try to imagine the essential part for that song. I slap my thighs, air drum, beat box... whatever it takes to get the creative process going. I search for a part that is both appropriate and unique. Then I consider it to be my job to transfer that part from my head to the tape machine (or the hard drive)."

**PM:** And how has your approach to the drums and your drum sound evolved over the years?

**BB:** "Playing the drums can be quite brutal on one's body. Therefore, I am always refining the ergonomics of my drum setup. I continue to experiment with seat heights, drum and cymbal angles and distances, and foot-pedal positioning. It sounds terribly nerdy, but if you consider the strain of playing a few hours per day, 365 days a year, these few inches make huge differences with the health of your back, neck and joints."

"In regards to the actual drums, my preference of both drums and cymbals has changed

» The electronic drum setup that Brendan uses includes a Ddrum SE4 drum kit.

towards the direction of larger sizes and darker sounds. At the music school I attended (University of Miami), my classmates and I all played either bebop or fusion-oriented drum setups. Smaller drum sizes. Quicker, drier cymbals. When I graduated from college, I discovered that these sounds, although very cool, did not work well for many of my projects. From that point on, I've kept honing my sound, in hopes of achieving something more functional and interesting in relation to music I have been called to play."

"Most recently, I've gained an allure to odd, distinct, idiosyncratic tones. For several years, I've been collecting and employing drums, cymbals and percussion instruments that will bring some of their own vibe to the track. Character is the key. I get bored with instruments that do not have at least a little bit of their own flavour by the end of the mixing process."

"Due to my working relationships with some outstanding front-of-house and recording engineers, I have also learned a lot about drum tuning — pitch, muting, compression, gates, microphone positioning. I keep all of these concepts in mind as I play." ■ **PM**

For more news and information on Brendan Buckley take a look at [www.brendanbuckley.com](http://www.brendanbuckley.com) or visit [www.myspace.com/brendanbuckleymusic](http://www.myspace.com/brendanbuckleymusic).